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IOWA'S HANDWRITTEN NEWSPAPERS

by
Roy
Alden
Atwood

Journalism flourished in frontier Iowa. By 1844, Iowa Territory boasted ten newspapers, including the well-known Burlington *Hawk-Eye*. But while readers in Davenport, Iowa City, Bloomington, and Fort Madison enjoyed the convenience of printed news, the citizens of Washington followed current events by means of three handwritten newspapers — Daniel Stover's *Quarterly Visitor*, Samuel James' *Domestic Quarterly Review*, and the *Washington Shark*, co-edited by Nathan Littler and Richard McMillan. The popularity of these newspapers, which appeared ten years in advance of the first local printing press, attested to the hunger of Washington readers for word of local and national events.

Unfortunately, just one of the handwritten newspapers survives, the second issue of Stov-

er's *Visitor*, dated June 1844. Modelled on conventionally printed papers, the *Visitor* offered news, feature stories, and editorials on matters of local interest. Four pages long, with three columns on each page, the paper displayed Daniel Stover's superb penmanship. Most of the handwriting was less than a quarter-inch in height, yet the letters were precisely drawn and quite legible. Of course, the *Visitor's* editor did not produce more than a few copies of each issue. These were intended to be purchased and read aloud to groups of people in and around frontier Washington.

Stover's *Quarterly Visitor* not only patterned itself on printed newspapers, it also ran stories and anecdotes of general interest from other printed Iowa newspapers. In the surviving copy, two items appeared from the Bloomington *Herald*. One was a news story about the "discoveries of Prof. Morse in Electro Magnetism," in which it was noted that "electric fluid will travel at the rate of 288,000 miles, equal to nearly 12 x the circumference of the globe, in one second." Another item was an aphorism lifted from the Burlington *Hawk-Eye*: "Woman is said to be like a Jew's harp, because she is nothing without a tongue, and must be pressed to the lips," to which Stover added, "Then she is music for the soul."

Editor Stover's reporting of activities in Washington included short factual items and feature articles about local weddings, deaths, weather, and farming accidents. He also recognized his readers' desire for entertainment and education in a newspaper, and so he scattered a variety of poems, short moralistic sketches, and biographies of American statesmen throughout the paper's four pages. The front page was devoted to entertaining musings about such diverse topics as female delicacy and beauty, memories of youth, and lively poems about human virtues.

ITEMS

A butcher boy in New York says that he has often heard of the "fore" quarters of the Globe but that he never heard any one say any thing about the "hind" quarters!—

The annual crop of cotton in the United States is 2,800,000 bales, of which there is about 300,000 bales manufactured annually into fabrics in the United States, the balance is exported.

There is raised annually in the western States 380 millions of bushels of wheat, making 63 millions of barrels of flour.

A small boy one day starting out to catch some fish, on leaving the house, his mother told him to "fish for perch"! After fishing some time, he pulled out a cat fish, being much provoked, he pulled off the cat from his hook and dashed it back into the water, saying— "When I go a-bating, I go a-bating! but when I go a-perching, I go a-perishing!"

In 1843 there was ^{carried} up, and down the Mississippi River 250 millions of dollars worth of property, 100 millions of which was agricultural products.

It is said that women are ^{in no place} commanded to kill the men, in the scriptures, except in the Golden Rule; "Do unto men, as you would have them to do unto you." (That's a positive injunction.)

Woman is said to be like a jaw sharp, because she is nothing without a tongue, and must be pressed to the lips. (Then she is music for the soul.)

Answer to a "puzzle" in "New York": Read, first, from left to right, then from right to left; line about, as— "O! may those hearts by love united, &c."

"Excuse, haist, and den bad!"—as the pig said when he broke through his sty.

"Why do you not hold your head as I do?" enquired an aristocratic lawyer, of a laboring farmer,—"Squire," replied the farmer, "look at that field of grain, all the valuable heads hang down like mine, while ^{they} that have nothing in them, stand upright like yours."

This was certainly a deserving, and good hit.

Iowa: The meaning of the word Iowa, is, "Land of Delights." It is Indian origin; and not supposed in beauty and convenience for use.

High Water.

By the late news, we received intelligence that the Mississippi River has receded from the wharf of St. Louis 12 miles, and now runs along the Illinois Bluffs, the Missouri has been so high that the Bank opposite its mouth was washed away, and let the main channel of the River, through the American Bottom, and comes into the River

Serious Accident.

Mr. John Jackson was drowned in Crooked Creek 18 miles South of this place, on the 19th day of June. The particulars of the case are as follows. Mr. J. was building a barn in that region, and had come up home on the 18th, he went back on the 18th and on the 19th he with six or seven other men went in a swimming in the Creek at being very high, he and 2 others were great looking about in the bottom where the water was 3 or 4 feet deep, as they could only swim a few links, and he unavoidably got into a deep hole, and strangled, and drowned. The good swimmers were in the main creek 40 or 50 rods off, but were so frightened, when they got to where he was sunk that they were unable to do any thing, and he was not raised for one hour, so that he could not be brought to life. His father was drowned in a similar way 4 years ago.

On hearing of the accident the Washington Lyceum met at the room of Mr. Sturges, to go in to some arrangement to have the corpse brought to town as this was the only association to which he belonged.

On Motion of Mr. Harrison, — Mr. Baldwin, Horston, and D. C. Stover were appointed to bring up the corpse. On Motion of Mr. Baldwin a committee of 3 he appointed to see to the grave and funeral. On Motion of Mr. Sturges the members of the Lyceum wear crops on the left arm 15 days.

OBITUARY.

Died in this place, on the 1st day of June H. Stone, Sheriff of this County, after a short illness. The death of Mr. Stone is much lamented by all those acquainted with him. He came here in early settlement of the County, and has been Sheriff of the County for four years. His death will not only be felt by his father, husband, and neighbours, but as a business man. He left behind him a blushing widow, and a prosperous family, to lament his early departure from this life.

HYMENAEAL.

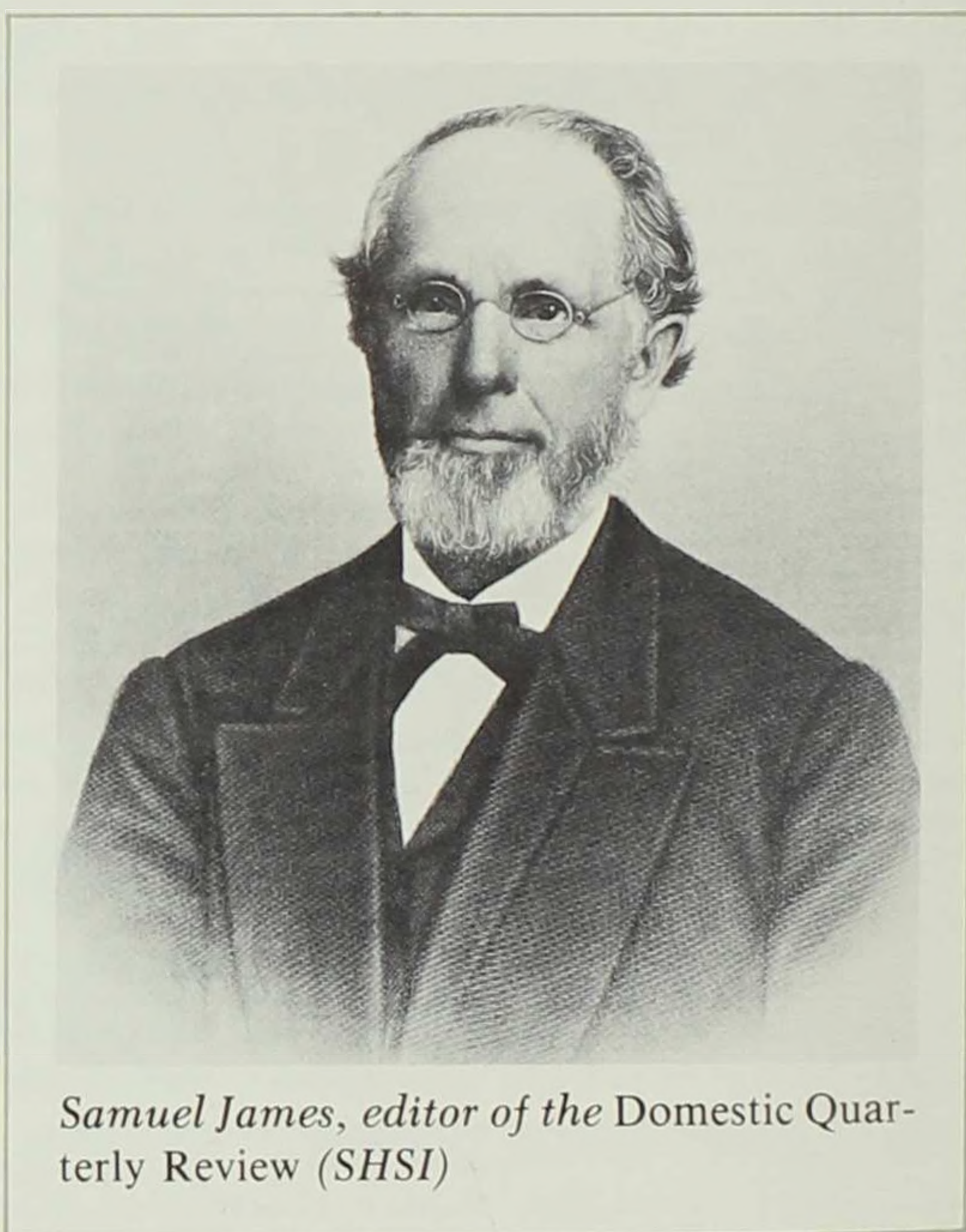
Married in this place, on the 25th of March Mr. Joseph Beck, to Miss Elizabeth Jackson. In receiving the above notice, we also received the usual "winters compliment" as he can not print without cake. Mr. Beck is a carpenter by trade, and will make an economical husband — and good neighbour.

Married on Dutch Creek on the 8th of April. Mr. William Churchman of this place, to Miss Martha Augustine, all C. is a practicing Attorney of the 2^d Judicial District of this Territory. Married on the 29th day of April at Iowa City Mr. S. C. Snowbridge to Miss Mary Willson, widow of the late Mr. Willson's Blacksmith of

Like most newspapers of its day, the *Visitor* had a large bannerhead at the top of the front page with its name sketched in bold lettering. It also had uncharacteristically large and neatly drawn headlines for each story and item throughout the paper. The *Visitor* apparently experienced deadline problems in its second issue, as Stover explained in "An Apology" that the "paper was not issued as soon as we did intend, as we were on a tour to [Central Iowa] when our 'press and type' should have been plying." It was his intent, at least, that the *Visitor* be published on a regular schedule. In Stover's published apology, he referred to his "patrons" but it is unclear whether or not the paper actually had any paid subscriptions or if this was just wishful thinking. Stover offered few hints as to the manner in which the *Visitor* was distributed, how many copies were prepared, or what sort of readership it enjoyed.

In any case, Stover clearly intended his publication for consumption by the residents of Washington and its environs. Committed to "General and Particular Intelligence," the *Visitor* met the community's need for a local organ to serve as a recorder of births, deaths, significant events, and light-hearted reflections — without any advertising announcements. Although the *Visitor* contained some politically oriented material, it was primarily interested in local news for local people.

Mention of the *Visitor's* local competition, the *Domestic Quarterly Review*, sometimes cropped up in the pages of Stover's paper, and not always in a complimentary light. In one editorial, Stover attacked Samuel James, editor of the *Review*, claiming that James' policy of being "neutral in politics" was deceptive and dangerous. Such a policy, according to Stover, was "like dipping water from a pool with a gourd, cut open on both sides; what comes in one side, goes out the other." He concluded his rebuke of James' paper and politics with one last gibe:



Samuel James, editor of the *Domestic Quarterly Review* (SHSI)

With all good feeling toward the Editor of the Review, we hope it is but assumed sentiments softened by words, to make his clamorous noise agreeable to the minds of his good old Whig & Tyler friends.

Although Stover was apparently the more politically aggressive of the two men, James — not Stover — later became a career politician in Iowa.

Daniel Stover had come to Iowa Territory in 1839 from Indiana and had settled in Iowa City with his brother, George R. Stover. They moved to Washington shortly afterward. During his years in the small frontier community, Stover was a businessman and possibly a store owner; his brother worked as his business partner and also had a legal practice. The editor was active in Democratic politics, serving as secretary of the state Democratic convention in 1844. At the convention, he was nominated for the position of county clerk. Sometime later in the

year, Stover moved to Sigourney, the county seat of Keokuk County, along with rival newspaper editor, Samuel James.

James was also involved in Iowa territorial politics. Appointed clerk of the district court in Keokuk County in 1844, James issued the first copies of his handwritten newspaper in the same year. In the premier issue of the *Domestic Quarterly Review*, James described the newspaper as "a complete family, Young Lady or Gentleman's newspaper" devoted to "Literature, Amusement and Particular Intelligence." According to a county history, the first *Review* met these expectations:

On the first page was the Carrier's address, a well written document, which was followed with a short but sensible article directed to the town loafers. An original and amusing ghost story occupied the remainder of the first and nearly half of the second page. The remainder of the second page and part of the third was occupied by an address delivered before the Young Men's Lyceum.

In Sigourney, James served as the city's first postmaster, holding that post from 1855 until President Lincoln's assassination in 1865. He continued his newspaper avocation when he served as interim editor and co-editor of the *Keokuk County News* during his second term as postmaster under Lincoln.

One of the editors of the other handwritten newspaper, Nathan Littler of the Washington *Shark*, was also active in public life. Littler served at various times as the constable of Washington, as a representative in Iowa's General Assembly, and as a justice of the peace. While editing the *Shark*, he wrote an early history of Washington County and later worked as a correspondent for the reorganized *Washington County Press*. Littler's co-editor, Richard B. McMillan, held public office as county assessor, township clerk, state legislator, and county superintendent,

but did not pursue his career in newspapers after his involvement with the *Shark*.

Unlike its two rivals, the *Shark* may have come closer to a gossip sheet than a newspaper. Pseudonyms were frequently used in its reports and the editors maintained their own anonymity. Readership was limited to those who could gather in public places, for the editors prepared just one copy of each issue of the *Shark*. Littler reported that this lone copy "was directed to some one whom the editors felt would give it widest publicity. Usually, when the paper came, its owner would go to the most frequented store in town, and taking his seat on a stool or nail keg, would proceed to read it to the crowd that quickly assembled."

Why Washington editors chose to publish papers in the absence of a printing press is uncertain, but several explanations are plausible. Each of them had political interests, and the newspapers may have been designed to advance their respective careers in public life, or improve Washington's status as a "paperless" county seat. Furthermore, all of the editors were close to the business whirl of the community, and may have been trying to attract additional commerce to Washington. Finally, because of the isolated nature of the pioneer community itself, the editors may have turned to handwritten newspapers as one means of recreating the cultural life they had traded for the opportunities of the Iowa frontier. □

Note on Sources

County histories, printed newspapers, and the surviving copy of the Washington *Quarterly Visitor* provided information for this article, which was presented as a paper to the History Division of the Association for Education in Journalism at its annual convention in Boston, August 1980. A fully annotated version of the article appears in the Summer 1980 issue of *Journalism History*.

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